

TIPS FOR DADS: ADVICE TO FATHERS WHO ARE OUT OF THE HOME

1. Respect the mother of your children. Regardless of your feelings for the children's mother, please treat her with respect—for the sake of the children. Children are happier and feel more secure when their parents get along. You should ignore negative comments, remain cordial, compliment her when you can, and keep the lines of communication open. It's best to seek common ground with her around common goals for the children, and never criticize her in front of the children.

2. Keep your promises. Children whose parents have broken up or never lived together often feel abandoned and distrustful of the adults in their lives, or blame themselves for what happened. Fathers who are not at home need to be careful to earn kids' trust. You need to keep promises you make to the children, and if this means promising less, that's fine. Keeping your word is essential to rebuild trust.

3. Don't be a "Disneyland Dad." Fathers who are not at home are often tempted to play "Disneyland Dad." They spend a lot of the time they have with their kids in expensive and fun activities. They miss chances to get to know their children in their ordinary lives. You'll get to know them a lot better doing regular activities. Here are some ordinary things to do with kids:

- Attend their sports events consistently.
- Take them to school or day care, and pick them up. Do this on time. It builds trust.
- Take them for medical or dental visits and read books for them while you wait.
- Take them out so the mother can do chores.
- Take them out to play in public parks.
- Take them out to get haircuts.
- Help them with homework—you can do that at the public library.

4. Stay in regular contact. If you are not at home, you should stay in regular contact with the kids. If they live locally, you should be faithful about seeing them regularly. If you do not live close by or are incarcerated, you should be faithful about calling or sending a letters or emails to them on a weekly basis. Children thrive on regular contact with their dads. This advice holds even for teenagers, who may have to be asked to make sacrifices in their social or sports schedules to keep up with you. In the end, maintaining the father-child bond is more important than a missed game or movie with friends.

5. Do not be too soft on your kids. Fathers who are not at home are tempted to go easy on their children when it comes to discipline. Nurture, fun and discipline always need to be in balance. Given how brief visits are, many dads do not want to risk angering their kids by disciplining or discussing behavior, but this is a big mistake. Children will take advantage of your lack of discipline by pushing the limits even more. Dads who are not home should be firm and consistent with their children, even if that means that sometimes a lot of time is spent on discipline. In the long-term, children who are disciplined well are better behaved and more respectful of their fathers than children who are given a free rein.

6. Do what you can for your children financially. Step up in whatever way you can. You don't have to be a "big wallet" guy. At the same time, regular financial support is a way of showing that you care and of modeling responsibility. Children who know their fathers contribute are more confident that their father is there for them. If your resources are limited, you can think of other things you can do with and for children. See no. 3 above for some ideas.

Note: This advice draws on educational material from The Children's Trust Fund of Massachusetts, The National Fatherhood Initiative, the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, and the National Center for Fathering. **Adapted by** F. Mederos from: Rosenberg, J. & Wilcox, W.B. (2006). The Importance Of Fathers In The Healthy Development Of Children. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect.